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Harbor cleanup drags on

EPA plan allows for 'negligible leakage'

By Natalie White
Standard-Times staff writer

NEW BEDFORD — Joshua Reth, 13, doesn't know a combined disposal facility from a record of decision.

But the youngster can tell a mumper from a shiner when he catches one of the bait fish from the brackish waters off Beach Street, where the Acushnet River and New Bedford Harbor meet. And he can tell you the rules of the river: Don't eat the fish and don't go swimming.

Joshua doesn't have any real sense of government bureaucracy or Superfund laws or the constraints of technology, but he knows the polluted river isn't likely to be cleaned up soon.

"I wish they would clean it up quicker," he said. "But it's always been this way. I know they're supposed to clean it up. I don't know if they will."

As U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials were getting ready Tuesday to present yet another proposal on yet another phase of the Acushnet River and New Bedford Harbor Superfund cleanup, Joshua and a few other Beach Street neighborhood kids poked about the frothy edges of the river that has been polluted their whole lives, their parents' lives and probably their grandparents' lives.

The multi-million dollar cleanup being orchestrated by the EPA seemed worlds away from the river banks.

A few hours later, in the auditorium of Greater New Bedford Regional Vocational-Technical High School, about 50 adults gathered to talk about the Superfund site, trying to map out plans to make the river and harbor a safer place for children like Joshua to play.

EPA Project Manager David Dickerson outlined the agency's preliminary plans for the second phase of the cleanup. The agency will officially announce this plan in late summer, Mr. Dickerson said, and then the public will have a chance to review it and comment on it before the plan is finalized, probably over the winter. The final plan is called a ROD, or record of decision.

Tuesday night was just a preview. Already, there is opposition.

Basically, the EPA wants to dredge about 170 acres of sediment from various spots in the river and harbor —

(See CLEANUP, Page A2)

Cleanup

(Continued from Page A1)
Everything that registers above 10 parts per million of polychlorinated biphenyls, except in certain marshlands and a few other areas.

The dredged material would then be placed, untreated, into three lagoons along the water's edge. The sides of these lagoons would be lined and the tops would be capped. The bottoms would not be sealed.

Mr. Dickerson said the lagoons, which are called combined disposal facilities or CDFs, would each extend about 20 to 30 acres and would provide safe, permanent storage, although he admitted there will be "a small, negligible amount of leakage." Overall, he said, the EPA feels the sediments are safer in the lagoons than in the river and harbor, where they are disturbed and moved around constantly by marine organisms and tides.

A banner from the citizens group Hands Across the River lined a row of about 20 seats in the auditorium.

"NO PERMANENT CDFs," it read. Group members feel the lagoons are hazardous waste pits that might leak and cause problems in the future.

Hands Across the River successfully fought the EPA's plans to dredge and then incinerate the hazardous material in the first phase of the cleanup. Members felt that burning the hazardous sediments would spew dangerous toxins into the air.

The EPA backed off and is now working with citizens groups and local officials to find an alternative way to treat the dredgings from the first phase, which are the most highly contaminated materials.

A few hours before the EPA meeting, at the plastic playground on Popes Island, 23-year-old Scott Kenny played with his 2-year-old son Danny and shook his head. He looked at the nearby harbor water.

"Yeah, I'd like to see it cleaned up. But it's been this way for as long as I can remember. I could never swim in it or fish in it. It seems they've been working on it an awful long time. I don't know if it will ever be done," he said. "But I am glad they didn't incinerate. I wouldn't have wanted that. That would have been awful."

While the Superfund world tries to figure out how to get rid of the pollution, the kids on Beach Street are consumed with other concerns.

"We're filling up these jugs with water, and then we're making waterfalls with them," said Brandon

TOXIC STORAGE

The federal Environmental Protection Agency plans to dredge 17.8 acres of PCB-contaminated sediment from the river and harbor and deposit them in lagoons in areas like the ones shown below. The lagoons will later be permanently capped.



Source: EPA preliminary report

Staff

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